DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 303 755 CG 021 455

AUTHOR	Pierce, William L.
TITLE	Adoption Issues, Trends and Networking.
INSTITUTION	National Committee for Adoption, Inc., Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	88
NOTE	19p.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adopted Children; *Adoption; *Agencies; *Agency Cooperation; Child Welfare; Counseling Objectives; Counseling Services; Counseling Techniques; Placement; *Pregnancy; *Pregnant Students; Social Work; *Trend Analysis

ABSTRACT

Teenage women with unplanned pregnancies constitute one of America's greatest challenges in terms of providing good services and sound counseling on options. Only about 7% of teenagers having babies make alternate childrearing plans either through formal adoption or informally with members of their families. The emphasis on making teenagers good parents may short-circuit the decision-making process and may inadvertently push teenagers, who may not be willing or able, into parenting. Schools can provide positive information about adoption. Agencies should look at their policies and the services which are offered to pregnant teenagers to determine whether they may be subtly encouraging single parenting over adoption. Adoption practices have changed in attempts to correct what may have been mistakes in the past. There is a trend in good adoption agencies to provide more post-adoption services to all members of the adoption circle. Networking between adoption agencies and non-adoption providers of service, particularly schools, health clinics, and family planning providers, can benefit young women. In order to provide the best services possible to meet the needs of pregnant teenagers, their male partners, their babies, and their families, every agency in the community needs to work together. (Author/ABL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED303755

ADOPTION ISSUES, TRENDS AND NETWORKING

William L. Pierce

CG 021 455

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

W. L. Pierce

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Good morning, my name is Bill Pierce. I am president of the National Committee For Adoption. NCFA is a national private organization which operates a clearinghouse for information on adoption and maternity services issues. We were founded 8 years ago in response to declining resources for young women considering adoption. The increased acceptability of abortion and single parenting in the 70s resulted in fewer young women choosing adoption for their children. Many agencies which had traditionally offered maternity and adoption services shifted their focus to teen parenting, assuming that changing societal mores would make adoption obsolete.

Today we have a situation in this country where 500,000 teens have babies each year. Only about 7% of them make alternate childrearing plans either through formal adoption or informally with members of their families. That leaves approximately 465,000 babies each year who are being raised by teens. We are all familiar with the problems that teen mothers and their children encounter. It is understandable that most programs for pregnant teenagers would concentrate on parenting issues in order to prevent some of those problems. Our concern is that the emphasis on making teens good parents may short-circuit the decision-making process and may inadvertently push teens, who may not be willing or able, into parenting.

We often hear frustration from pregnancy counselors who are uneasy that many of their clients are parenting, but do not know what to do to encourage them to consider adoption. Most teens come into a pregnancy

© 1988 by National Committee For Adoption. All right reserved.

program stating that they are going to keep their baby. After all, that is what society is telling them to do. Their friends have probably already discussed names with them, offered to babysit and planned the fun they will have with this new baby. What is generally missing is a careful consideration of the pros and cons of alternatives and a need to talk earlier about options. The role of the counselor is to challenge the young woman, young man and their families to look realistically at their situation, their needs, their resources, their life goals, their values, etc. and then make a decision, given all the information. Only after that process, which may take the entire pregnancy, will the counselor and the young woman be able to determine the optimal plan. Then the counselor can help the young woman to carefully implement the plan of either adoption or parenting. The decision-making process itself is a process of maturing which will help the young woman in whatever she wants to do. The skill building for child care can wait.

Today I want to raise some questions and offer some suggestions about how you can ensure that adoption receives a fair hearing in order to facilitate the decision-making process for pregnant teens, their partners and their families.

Discussions of adoption as a positive solution to an unplanned pregnancy must be done on a variety of levels, especially in schools. The issue of teen pregnancy brings out a variety of feelings among teens. Usually there is some judging of the girl who got caught; but there is also a rallying around her by her close friends who want to help her through this difficult situation. Often the pregnancy and birth are romanticized by the peer group and the pregnant teen receives

a great deal of attention. A normal response in a crisis situation is to tell anyone who will listen about your problem. What is usually not considered, is that the more people you tell, the more your choices may be limited. This is especially true for teens who are pregnant. A teen who decides that a confidential adoption is in her and her child's best interest, may find that it is difficult to carry out her plan if she has shared information about her pregnancy with many people. Many young women still prefer to go to maternity homes where they can receive counseling and support away from the pressures of family members and friends. It is possible for young women to go for the latter part of the pregnancy, place the child in an adoptive home, and return to her life without the stigma and pressures attached to out-of-wedlock pregnancy; but only if the entire community does not know about it already. Confidential maternity and adoption services allow the young woman one less problem she has to worry about as she makes the difficult transition back to being a teen after the delivery of her child. It takes some pressure off of the entire family, particularly younger siblings, which may result from gossip.

The young woman who remains at home during her pregnancy and shares with friends that she is planning adoption may be subjected to unsolicited advice of how she should try to parent the child and suggestions that she is less than caring if she does not. If word is out that she is planning adoption, she may also be prey to anyone and everyone who knows of a loving, infertile couple who would like to adopt her child. It is not uncommon for pregnant teens to be approached at school or in malls by desperate childless couples. She will not be able to, and we would not want her to, avoid talking to

people during her pregnancy. If she is connected with a good agency earlier in her pregnancy, she can receive the support she needs to counter outside forces, well-meaning or otherwise.

Schools can provide a great service to teens before they are pregnant by providing positive information about adoption and challenging students to examine their attitudes and the negative impact they may be having on friends they are trying to help. Many young women do not know where to turn when they believe they are pregnant. Discussing the process of seeking help and providing suggestions of the most appropriate people to provide the help can prevent much heartache for a young woman.

Agencies should look at their policies and the services which are offered to pregnant teens to determine whether they may be subtly encouraging single parenting over adoption. For example what is the name of your program? Does it contain the word "parenting" in the title? Does this already suggest to clients the desired outcome? Is the word "parenting" necessary for clients and community understanding of the purpose of the program?

What services are offered? Are they mostly geared towards skill building for motherhood or do they promote decision making about motherhood? Is the focus on the young woman as a mother or as a young woman as a whole individual? Are discussions of career plans based on her need to get a job to support herself and her child or on her need for a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment? How much attention is adoption given? Is it the topic of one group session or is it incorporated into every discussion? What special supports are provided those who are considering adoption in your program? How does the

agency handle peer pressure to parent? How do you deal with issues of bonding and breastfeeding? Do discussions of the importance to the child of bonding make it difficult for a young woman to choose adoption, fearing that she will be causing great harm to her child or do you discuss the many opportunities for bonding in one's life? What services are provided the father of the baby and the teen's parents? Are they involved in the decision making process? Are they informed of the issues involved in adoption and parenting? Are the teen's parents helped to see that they have the right to define their role in this pregnancy and to set limits and provide support as they are able? These are just some of the ways agencies (and by "agencies" I mean any of the various humane service programs, education, health, employment, soical services, ect.) may be impacting a young woman's decision. Many of the things agencies and counselors do promote one outcome over another. Sometimes promoting one outcome cannot be helped because the value of the service outweighs the influence on the clients. However, agencies must be aware of the messages they are sending so that they can adjust them when possible and counter them with other services and messages when necessary.

Specifically, what can agencies do to encourage young women to consider adoption for their children? First and foremost the decision-making process regarding adoption or parenting must be kept open throughout the pregnancy and after so that the young woman can continue to weigh her situation as she gains new insights and information. Young women, particularly teens, go back and forth a dozen times during their pregnancy about what is best for themselves and their child. Just think of how many phone calls it takes for teens to decide what

they are going to wear to a football game. Closing off her options at three months may encourage her to feel trapped in a situation where she has no control.

The decision making process should involve an assessment of the young woman's current situation, her needs, her resources, her goals, her values, her relationships, her family's and boyfriend's needs and desires and most importantly, the baby needs. It should be very concrete, particularly for teens, and should involve homework including developing a budget with actual costs of medical care, diapers, formula, clothes, furniture, child care, entertainment,transportation etc. She should also work out with her family, and other persons who will provide emotional or financial support, a detailed plan of each person's role and responsibilities. This provides the young woman and her family a realistic picture of what a baby would mean in their lives so that they can make decisions accordingly and also be prepared when conflicts arise if she decides to parent. Worksheets that the client can take home are very useful for this purpose. The Adoption Option: A Guidebook for Pregnancy Counselors contains a good example of an inventory of questions that every pregnant teen should be asked, to ensure that she has made an informed decision. It also provides a very good overview of adoption including a brief history, current practices and state laws. Our Adoption Factbook is also a useful reference.

The counselor should discuss adoption with each and every client early in the pregnancy in order to determine what personal barriers the client may have to adoption. Often teens have misinformation about adoption and are making decisions based on myths. Sometimes clarifying perceptions about adoption helps the young woman to get in touch with

her own fears and feelings about not only adoption, but the pregnancy and herself.

It is very important that when a teen says she could not consider adoption that the counselor find out why. Her reasons may reveal as much about her attitudes and her ability to parent as they do about making an adoption plan. For example, often we hear from young women that they cannot plan adoption for their child because they must do the "responsible" thing. They got pregnant and now they will just have to bite the bullet and raise the child. No one would want to see a situation where a mother is raising a child as "punishment", yet if the counselor does not ask why a teen will not consider adoption, that information may never be known. The teen may still decide to parent, but the counselor will have the opportunity to help her to see that there are several responsible choices that she can make -- she does not have to made to be pay for a mistake of her youth for her entire life.

A Case for Adoption by Bethany Christian Services is a very useful booklet outlining some of the common misconceptions that young women have about adoption. It also provides suggestions of how to find out what the underlying fears are that young women have about adoption and how to respond to them once they are revealed.

Throughout the pregnancy, the counselor should utilize every opportunity to provide facts about the adoption process -- how parents are selected by the agency and the birthmother, what rights and responsibilities each person involved with the adoption has, legal matters, temporary foster care, etc. Members of the adoption circle such as adopted persons, birth parents, adoptive parents can be very helpful in providing this information and demystifying adoption.

Adopted persons can relieve birthparents' fears by sharing their feelings about being adopted, their birthparents and their adopted parents. Birthparents can provide insights about what it was like for them to make an adoption plan, the rewards and difficulties, suggestions to facilitate the decision-making, etc. Adoptive parents can share their feelings about their children, their children's birthparents, how they have dealt with adoption issues with their child, etc. Films are also a useful tool to encourage discussion and elicit feelings about making an adoption plan for one's child.

Particular attention should be given to the parents of the pregnant teen. Often, the teen's parents are carrying a tremendous amount of guilt over their daughter's pregnancy. Many feel they have failed her (some have) and believe that the only way to make that up is by helping her to parent her child. They are also feeling a tremendous amount of pressure from society to support their grandchild since they do not have the same limitations as their daughter -- they have the emotional maturity, they are more likely to be financially able, etc. They also feel a bond with their grandchild and often are surprised at the intensity of their feelings toward the child. Parents who have raised their own children may not be able or willing to take on the responsibilities of an infant. Parents who "rescue" their daughter may encounter problems later when they find that their daughter is still unable to take responsibility for herself or her child because they have always bailed her out. Families need the opportunity to look at the situation objectively. They deserve to know the possible problems they will encounter whether they choose adoption or parenting so that they can make decisions accordingly.

An important consideration in presenting adoption to clients, their families, the public in general, is to be sure to use positive language. Language related to adoption is loaded with value statements which often create barriers to consideration. For example the phrase "giving a child up for adoption" suguests that the child is being disposed of. "Surrender" is worse. A more positive and accurate term is "making an adoption plan for a child." I have included in the information that I handed out an article which includes a list of positive and negative adoption language. I would encourage you all to use positive language with clients as we have found it makes the decision-making easier for young women when they can view their choices positively.

One of the barriers that many pregnancy counselors who are not directly affiliated with an adoption agency have is that often they are not very familiar with the adoption process and practices. We all hesitate to discuss things we do not know. Adoption is a field where we have seen rapid change in the past twenty years. Many of the changes have been good, others raise cause for concern. We often hear the terms "open adoption or openness" and "closed or confidential adoption" when describing agency practice. Current practice is so varied from agency to agency that it is not possible to define what is actually meant by either term.

Over the years we have learned a lot about the impact adoption has on various members of the adoption circle. In the past it was a common assumption that adoption was the best solution for a young woman who was pregnant out-of-wedlock and she best put the experience behind her and get on with her life. The assumption is still valid today;

however, we now know more about the process she must go through in order to get to the point of putting the experience behind her. This is not to suggest that she will ever forget the experience or the child, but rather will find peace with her decision.

Many people in this room may conjure up an image of secrecy and institutions when they think about adoption in the past. Often women were not encouraged to have too much involvement with the child because it was believed it would be easier for them. We have learned that placing one's child in an adoptive home is a deep loss and that it is necessary to confront the pain of the loss in order to grieve that loss. Many women in the past were able to grieve successfully and come to terms with their decision, while others were not. A lot depends on the particular individual, her circumstances and supports.

Many of the changes in adoption practice are attempts to correct what may have been mistakes in the past. Today it is widely accepted that a young woman should play an active role in making an adoption plan for her child. This allows her to feel that she is carrying out her responsibility as a parent or making sure that her child will be well taken care of and loved. This means different things to different agencies.

Good, ethical adoption agencies will encourage a young women to share information about herself and the father of the baby by leaving complete, accurate social and medical histories for her child. They will also ask her what type of family she is seeking for her child. She can specify religion, ethnic and racial background, number of children in the adoptive family, rural or urban setting, etc. She may be able to choose a family anonymously from a group of profiles which

have been preselected by agency staff. The secrecy which was involved in earlier adoptions is not practiced by good ethical agencies, even those who place a high value on maintaining the confidentiality of the various members of the adoption circle. There is much nonidentifying information shared between parties so that each will have a better sense of the other.

Beyond these general principles, many agencies differ in how far they will go with sharing information. Some agencies encourage birth mothers to leave letters in their child's file explaining why they chose adoption. Some agencies will allow the exchange of pictures and gifts between birthparents and adoptive family -- some have time limits others leave it up to the participating parties. Some agencies arrange face to face meetings or telephone calls where no identifying information (last names) is shared. Others allow identifying information to be shared, arrange for adopting parents to be present at delivery, and encourage continued contact between birth parents and adopting family. Some birthparents will leave affidavits with the agency allowing for contact if the child is interested at a future date.

The adoption and maternity services field is divided on many of these practices. While some may seem to be helpful to one member of the adoption circle, they may create problems for another. Adoption is a delicate balance of needs and rights of all the parties, with particular emphasis on the needs of the child as he grows. Once he becomes an adult, the rights of each of the parties should have equal weight. Unfortunately, because of time limitations we cannot go into the pros and cons of all the new or experimental practices. Before

making any decisions about what practices you believe are in the best interest of a client and before making recommendations to the client, it is important to find out the arguments on both sides and listen very carefully to the rationale. Consider carefully what impact the practice will have on all members of the adoption circle. What appears to be helpful at first glance, may actually cause further problems down the road.

The purpose of the new practices is supposed to be to make the grieving process easier on the birthmother by providing her information and making the loss more real so that she can say goodbye. There is concern among many counselors that some of the practices which encourage continued contact through letters, pictures, and personal meetings may instead camouflage the loss and keep the wound open. The results may be the same for the birthmother going through these new practices as they were for the woman who was denied any information, because the lack of clear limits and defined roles may prohibit the mourning process. The problem then, as it is now, is not necessarily how much information or participation a woman did or did not have, but her ability to successfully mourn the loss of her child.

There is a trend in good agencies to provide more post adoption services to all members of the adoption circle. There is recognition that young women may need support at a future date to resolve some of the issues they could not resolve at earlier stages of development, particularly birthmothers who were pregnant as teens. If a woman has problems later in life related to a previous adoption plan, it does not indicate that she has made a wrong decision, but that she may have to finish grieving from an earlier stage. Unfortunately, many women who

come for counseling years later, do not remember accurately the circumstances surrounding their decision to place the child and instead look at the decision from the context of their current situation, at their current level of maturity. It is the counselor's responsibility to help the woman to put the decision into the proper perspective. You, as counselors, may encounter women who have incomplete grieving from a previous adoption placement. It is important for you to recognize that this is normal and it is your role to provide her grief counseling as you would anyone seeking help for a current or past loss.

An issue most of you are aware of, which is very popular in the media, is "search", where adopted adults seek out their birthparents or vice versa. Again it is very controversial with advocates of "open records" claiming that it is an adopted person's birthright to know his birthparents. Those of us on the other side believe that each person in the adoption circle has a right to privacy, which only he or she can waive.

The National Committee For Adoption supports the concept of a mutual consent registry established on the state level.These exist in Texas and 21 other states. This allows adopted adults and birthparents to sign up with a central registry (or agency registry) indicating their desire for a meeting. If all parties register, a match will be made and the parties will be notified so that a meeting can be arranged. This process allows for contact between consenting adults, while protecting the privacy of those who do not want to be contacted for a variety of reasons.

Women in the past were promised confidentiality when they made adoption plans for their children. Today there are still many women

who will only make an adoption plan if their privacy can be insured. I can tell you horror story after horror story of women whose lives have been disrupted by contact from a child who was placed in an adoptive home. Some women may change their mind as the years pass and they have the option of registering at any time. However, making public that they received services from a social service agency has to be their personal choice and be carried out by their personal direct action. Opening adoption records is a dangerous precedent for all social and mental health services. We should all be concerned that we could be asked to make public names of all our clients who are receiving a variety of services. As counselors, you can help young women look at the pros and cons of maintaining confidentiality while planning for the future. You can reassure her that this is a decision that does not need to be made now, since she does not know how she will feel in 18 - 20 years, given her life situation. It may be a decision she would like to delay for now and make at a later time when she has more information.

I have touched briefly on only a few of the issues in adoption and needs of young women experiencing a problem pregnancy. But as you know, each issue is very complex. Each person in this room has a particular expertise according to his or her own personal skill and agency setting. Our needs for networking are great in order to provide all the services needed by all the clients.

You should not feel that you must provide all the services that a teen considering adoption needs. However, anyone providing services to pregnant teens should feel comfortable initiating discussions about adoption. The adoption agencies in your locale should be able to

provide you with the information you need about their policies and procedures, state laws, etc. so that you can share general information with clients.

You do not have to be concerned about providing specialized adoption counseling. Once you have determined that a young woman is considering adoption, you should feel free to make a referral to an adoption agency. Adoption agency counselors can then take over the counseling on the issues specific to adoption such as grieving, future plans, the short and long term impact of various practices on the pregnant teen, the father of the baby and their families.

An important thing to remember is that a girl does not have to be firm in her decision to make an adoption plan when she becomes involved with an agency. Good adoption counselors expect a young woman to change hermind many times and will make sure that she has considered all her options carefully before making the final decision. Many counselors in other settings are hesitant to send a girl to an adoption agency believing that it is only appropriate for girls who already know definitely what they want. Many clients have the same misconception. If everyone who came in already knew what she wanted, there would be no need for counseling.

I suggest that you get to know the staffs at adoption agencies, just as you get to know the staff at the hospital, the school, other social service agencies. Find out what their philosophy is on various issues. Find out how your two agencies can work in partnership to meet the needs of various clients. Once referrals are made, will the adoption agency become responsible for seeing to it that all services are provided to a young woman and her family or will your agency stay

involved? This of course will depend on your setting and the type of services you provide. If you are a school or health setting, most likely you will continue to provide services to the client. If you are primarily a counseling setting, the adoption agency may take over that responsibility or you may both continue to provide counseling on different issues. Often the involvement of both agencies will be decided on a case by case basis. A good working relationship between agencies will facilitate a smooth transition for clients.

I encourage you to keep adoption agencies in mind to provide a variety of services directly in your agency, not just through referrals. Agency personnel can give presentations to staff and clients to explain procedures and correct misconceptions about adoption. Adoption agency staff can be regular visitors in group sessions. They can provide birthparents, adopted persons, and adoptive parents for discussions with pregnant teens to help demystify the adoption process. It may even be possible to have a counselor from an adoption agency come out to your site to provide services. Many agencies have placed staff in high schools, family planning clinics, health clinics, etc., so that clients can get the services they need without having to go all over the city. Your staff at your particular sites are freed up to offer the services they do best.

Adoption agency personnel can also help you to look at your programs to see how your practices and policies may be encouraging or discouraging adoption. By the same token you can help adoption agencies look at their own policies and procedures and make suggestions about how they can be more responsive to the needs of teens and their families based on your experience and the feedback you have heard from

clients. It is difficult for all of us to know what barriers we have erected because clients are often hesitant to tell us, or they have never reached us for services to begin with because of those barriers.

Adoption agencies need the specialized services you can all provide to ensure that clients' needs are met. None of us have the financial or staff resources to do it alone. We all have the same goal -- to provide the best services possible to meet the needs of pregnant teens, their male partners, their babies and their families. It is going to take every agency in the community working together to achieve that goal.

I realize that I have gone over many issues very quickly and superficially, because of time limitations. I want to spend time now answering questions about anything I have said and discussing particular problems or successes you have had presenting adoption to pregnant teens.